

Climate Sunday – St. Stephen’s, Exeter

Today has been designated as Climate Sunday in what is now known by churches across the world as the Season of Creation (or Creation Time). As you may be aware, the ancient Christian calendar began not at Advent but the start of September. This puts the Gospel message in a rather different context, opening with the stories of the beginning of life before moving on to the narratives of Salvation. This morning we recall particularly a Climate in crisis.

The late David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, used to say Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions, so what did he mean?

Our Christian faith rests on two pillars of teaching or Doctrine: firstly, that of **Creation**, and secondly an understanding of **Incarnation**.

Creation: I believe it is a truism to say that God creates the Universe before creating the Earth; God creates the Earth before creating the creatures on the Earth; God creates other creatures before creating human

creatures; and God creates people before creating the Church.

Therefore, the purposes of God go back into pre-history, and do not begin in recent past times, let alone during our own lives.

This perspective opens up a different view on the origins and destination of life. The divine intent goes back way before our own consciousness.

The Genesis creation passages underline the dynamics of this in material and spiritual terms. “At the end of each day, God sees that it is good, and it is very good”.

In English this sounds all rather nice and pleasant, a jolly good job by a generously productive God! But if we recall that in English the words ‘good’ and ‘God’ come from the same root, we have a more significant take. What we might say is that God sees that it is godly, indeed it is very godly. In other words, we are being told that the Earth is itself Sacred. Natural beauty and wonder are expressions of the divine.

God shapes the planet through the processes of physics, chemistry, magnetism, gravity, electricity and biological progression. Evolution demonstrates the ongoing nature

of existence – we are growing in a *'creatio continua'*, to use the Latin expression of old.

We are special creatures living on a special world, in which all is connected in a web of intricate relationships and seen to be sacrosanct.

Furthermore, this Earth becomes the place of divine revelation. The Spirit gives life through the physicality of the material world. We are not floating spirits or ghosts. Formed in God's image, we are 'earthlings', born of fire, ground, air and water. Our divine home is located in the physical cosmos, and it is through the mystery of fleshly life that we meet 'the Holy'.

This brings us to the second pillar - ***Incarnation***. So, the created order is itself so sanctified and revered, that it can become the dwelling place of the Holy – God in or on the Earth.

In Hebrew Scripture we read of holiness being discovered often in the physicality of life: a burning bush; a pillar of cloud; a column of fire; a rocky mountain; a winged dove. King Solomon's temple was designed as a microcosm of life representing the seven days of Creation.

This understanding of God taking earthly form develops further with the Judges and Kings seen as divine

arbitrators, the prophets who speak the word of the Lord, with Jesus who becomes the Word, and with the Church which becomes the Body of Christ. Later it is the Disciples and Saints who devoutly incarnate the love of God.

Santa Teresa of Avila summed up this approach when she suggests; *'Christ now has no hands, no feet but ours; ours are the eyes through which he sees compassion; ours are the hands by which he blesses the world'*.

Pope Francis goes on to say *"incarnation happens where the divine and human meet in the sacred, seamless garment of Creation"* (Laudato Si).

So perhaps this is what David Jenkins had in mind with his remark about materialistic faith?

The teachings around **Creation** and **Incarnation** are not world-denying, but rather matter-affirming. God's Earth because it is the gift and the place of the Holy.

Sacredness is embedded in the physicality of life. Humans are tangible, bodily beings who live by bread, water and wine, and through them encounter the divine.

The activist and author Wendell Berry reminds us, “*there are no un-sacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places*”. Dis-gracefully, we are de-sacralising the world.

So, what has gone wrong?!? Why do we treat the sacred Earth so badly? Why are we passing on such a toxic and uncertain legacy of worsening pollution, declining biodiversity, water shortages, and, above all, the rising Climate Emergency?

In essence, our culture has become saturated by consumerist lifestyles that demand too much in a confined space for 8 billion people. The consequences are that the planet can no longer sustain the same capacity to provide for life. Our expectations and wants are rapidly outstripping supplies and leaving too much waste. Our insatiable appetite to burn fossil fuels is rebounding on us disastrously.

Bishop John V. Taylor, recognised that the road of **excess** is the way to calamity back in 1975 in his book ‘Enough is Enough’: “*We are being made to expect too much. We are taking too much. We are scrapping too much. We are paying, and compelling others to pay, far too high a price.*”

You don’t need me to remind you that we now live in precariously challenging times. Our one-dimensional lifestyles are exceptionally dominated by **disposability, disconnectedness, dysfunction** and **dis-ease**.

One of the religious terms used to describe our predicament is ‘idolatry’ – when our own possessions possess us! Idolatry is the focussing of our attention and energy on superficial distractions. We select the wrong priorities and we fail to love others.

Pope Francis sums this up: “*the emptier a person’s heart, the more they need to buy, own and consume*”.

We forget our sense of human togetherness on the one hand, and our need to be rooted in the ecology of the Earth on the other.

In this depressing scenario, where do we find examples of reversing the destruction of the Earth’s life support systems? Where are there signs of hope and possibility?

I must admit at times I find it really difficult to answer this question! With mounting scientific evidence that things are getting worse and we are running out of time, I sometimes struggle to see a way out... I confess I try to battle with the greenwash and to look for deeper

pointers, more profound solutions to some of those often offered to placate us. But it is not an easy task.

Nevertheless, our faith invites us to be hopeful, in spite of all circumstances of seeming good or ill...

For the moment let's look at this morning's Gospel reading (Mark 7:24-30) from the perspective of Creation.

Jesus is on the move from Galilee to Tyre. He is breaking away from the safe and known. He encounters a woman of dual heritage (a Greek born in Syrophenicia), from another faith tradition, and with a possessed or unclean daughter.

In various ways, Jesus is a strong advocate for children. In the society of his day these were frequently abandoned or abused – especially the girls. So here, as in other passages, he stands up for them.

The mother's response seems to accept this but she goes on to remind him that animals (dogs) are also part of our community and have their needs too. She paints a more holistic picture of what is going on – where both children and dogs can eat and share together. And her attitude leads Jesus to respond positively. She is broadening the horizon and has a greater faith than is recognised.

We know the Phoenicians worshipped Mother Earth and maybe it was this influence which prompts her to see beyond people and to speak for all created life.

Therefore, for me, this is a story of pushing the boundaries – of moving from the narrow closedness of the obvious, to embracing difference: outsiders, women, children, animals, plants and food.

As the writer of Psalm 146 suggests, it is the Creator who provides through the Earth in a society of sharing, justice and integrity. We are to include the excluded, and in today's terms that must involve the very planet on which we stand. Why is 'the Climate' so low on the agenda of decision-makers?!

In our current situation, it is essential that we recognise that everything is connected. We need a universal communion and a sense of deep oneness with the weak and the vulnerable, human and non-human.

The concept of '***the Common Good***' has to be extended to the entire planet and is inseparable from human ecology. All things are connected and our interconnectedness should not be broken...

How may we re-prioritise our actions and attitudes in the face of the ecological pressures we face? What more is

to be done as well as recycling, repairing and reusing, which are necessary but not sufficient in our day?

I share five observations though they are neither unique:

- i) **Energy** On the world stage we need to urgently invest out of fossil fuels and much more radically in to Low or Zero Carbon renewables. Locally and domestically we need to do the same – and time is not on our side
- ii) **Transport** We need to drastically reduce our international air travel (as we have needed to under COVID). We also must cut down on our transport needs, and to not use petrol or diesel cars as we often do. Let's promote Active Travel instead
- iii) **Resources and Food** It follows that we must resource our communities from much closer to home and not import over huge distances. Locally grown food generally uses less energy and produces less carbon. Food and water waste are the evils of our day
- iv) **Restorations and Replenishing** Ecosystems need not only protection, they need regeneration. We need to replant and rewild in Devon, and

replenish rainforests, coral reefs and top soils elsewhere

- v) **Revaluing** Finally, we need to revalue ourselves so we may live better with less. Simplicity of lifestyle is a vocation for some but valuable also for many others. Let us reassess the relentless accumulation of stuff so we can realise our deeper potential, which is dependent on but not confined to a materialistic society

Ultimately, we are judged by how we love and are loved but if **excess** prevents us from becoming who we might be, it surely has to be challenged and changed?

We are today facing a Climate Emergency, though to listen to many politicians, you would doubt this! When we face other emergencies, life slows or stops so the situation can be re-stabilised.

Can you imagine a disaster happening and life going on as usual all around it? With other crises we have government announcements and advice on a regular basis. We expect this in times of war or other threat. Why is this not happening with climate chaos, which is far more dangerous than other crises, even COVID?

Where are the voices and the visions for a different kind of society, which speaks out for the common good of the planet and all its peoples?

The Creation which we believe to be so sacrosanct is undoubtedly under immense pressures. The cumulative effects of our consumer culture are systematically undermining the Earth's ability to support life as it has for millions of years.

We cannot celebrate Creation Time and Climate Sunday without questioning this and offering a healthier and more holistic vision for the future. Love, justice and hope demand it through the Grace of God.

Our human physicality is the vehicle for our creation and our redemption, but in good relationship with the whole of life. We are invited to be whole and to be holy. This we cannot do if the ground under our feet is desecrated beyond repair.

Our faith pushes us to include all in our experience of life – human and non-human alike. And pushing the boundaries we must look at longer term, more profound and more sustainable solutions for the entire created world.

Let us go in peace to love and serve God through the Earth which is common to us all. In the name of the Creator, and of the Son, and of the Spirit of life. Amen

Martyn Goss, 5th September 2021